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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 009179

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/25/2026

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SUBJECT: DEPUTY MOI TO SENATOR NELSON:THE KEY TO WINNING
WAR ON TERROR IS DEFEATING EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY

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Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. Deputy Minister of Interior Mohamed bin Naif told Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) that the key to winning the war on terror is defeating the terrorists' ideology. He echoed the senator's other interlocutors in supporting Iraqi unity and the SAG's noninterference policy. The Deputy Minister outlined the SAG's re-education program, which focuses on realigning the beliefs of extremists and ensuring their families are adequately supported. He described the Internet as the "new madrasas" (religious schools) and emphasized that teachers, not textbooks, are the main problem with Saudi schools. Mohamed warned that if the Iranians achieve nuclear weapons capability, "they will use it." END SUMMARY.

12. (S) During his December 17 meeting with Deputy Minister of Interior Mohamed bin Naif, Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) expressed his appreciation for MoI's cooperation with U.S. intelligence agencies and asked what more could be done to engage Iraq's Sunni leadership to gain their support for the unity government. The Deputy Minister noted that the extremists are damaging what "we most believe in -- our religion." Terrorists are using this, he said, to justify their actions. We must, he insisted, "defeat the ideology," in addition to focusing on this problem from a security perspective. Just as important, said Mohamed, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. must work together as one team. He lauded Iraqi Prime Minister Al Maliki's recent call for former members of the security services to rejoin these forces, emphasizing Saudi support for Iraqi unity and noninterference in internal affairs. (NOTE: This message was a consistent theme in all of Senator Nelson's meetings. Each of his interlocutors emphasized that the Saudis would not support the Sunnis to the exclusion of other groups and would not interfere in Iraq's internal affairs. END NOTE.)

13. (S) In response to Senator Nelson's question as "how to

best control Al-Qaeda," Mohamed simply said, "We do not presume to control Al-Qaeda." "As soon as we adopt that mindset," he explained, "we are losing." Saudi Arabia must always be on the alert, he insisted, and the government counts on the public to be aware and reject these people. He recounted the shock people felt when the Grand Mosque in Makkah was seized 27 years ago, as well as how the populace subsequently relaxed. "We cannot do this again," he stated simply. The public may not always agree with the government, he said, but all agree the security of the Kingdom must be ensured.

¶4. (S) He emphasized the key role the family plays in the SAG's efforts to combat terrorism, saying they need to know what signs to look for in their sons and daughters. As an example of this focus, Mohamed explained how the SAG extends condolences to families of suicide bombers and compensates them. Either the bombers will be seen as heroes to be emulated or victims, he said, "and we prefer that they be considered victims." If the SAG does not take care of the families, said the Deputy Minister, someone else will -- and "we want to be the hero."

¶5. (S) Mohamed briefly outlined the SAG's re-education program (septel), noting that it was created after the Egyptian model. Clerics and psychologists meet with detainees to help "reshape" their beliefs, which, according to the Deputy Minister, is working. He described how in 2003, extremists were all over the Internet claiming that the government was torturing detainees. Recognizing that many people would not believe the government if it simply denied the accusations, the SAG asked credible clerics to visit detainees. Subsequently, the clerics -- without any prompting -- spoke publicly and privately with family members about what they had learned. Gradually, word spread about actual prison conditions.

¶6. (S) The Saudis are currently building five new detention

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facilities for terrorists and extremists, said Mohamed, where detainees will be housed according to the degree of danger they represent, so as to avoid co-locating, for example, young, impressionable prisoners with hard-core extremists. Those who are "fixable," he said, are allowed to return to their homes after they go to court. After serving their terms, the receive assistance in finding jobs, are monitored, and encouraged to resume a normal life.

¶7. (S) When the SAG detains individuals, including those described as "hard-liners," it first arranges a meeting with the family. "We want to change him from wanting to die to wanting to live," said the Deputy Minister, outlining the tremendous impact the family often makes on these individuals. Next, clerics are brought in who can discuss with authority the individual's religious beliefs, which he said must be "shaken up." Mohamed pointed to the return of those detainees who had been released for Ramadan as an indicator of success. He said that all but one returned at the appointed time, and the one individual who was late (only by several hours) had been in a traffic accident that resulted in hospitalization. Charge D'Affaires noted that the return of all these individuals was a key factor in the recent release to the Saudis of 16 additional Guantanamo Bay detainees, whom the Deputy Minister described as being in Afghanistan for a reason -- not just incidental players.

¶8. (S) The Deputy Minister indicated that the SAG's strategy for combating terrorism came about following the emergence of such tactics as suicide bombing. He said the SAG previously had been able to keep them "on the run," but Iranian influence, the information readily available on the Internet, and Al-Qaeda's gradual morphing to smaller, more operational cells have made it increasingly difficult to prevent incidents. "This," he insisted, "is why we must focus on combating the ideology."

¶9. (S) The Deputy Minister said the role of "madrasas" (Islamic schools) in fomenting extremist thinking has been exaggerated by the media. He admitted that Saudi textbooks need to be updated, but identified the real problem as the teachers. Even the best textbooks, he said, cannot prevent a teacher from instilling in students radical ideologies. He described the Internet as the "new madrasas," calling it a "virus" and stressing that families need to pay close attention to what their children are doing on-line.

¶10. (S) Mohamed continued that "bad clerics should not be clerics," but said MoI should not attempt to change their orientation. That is the job of other clerics, he insisted. Saudi Arabia has a committee of clerics, whom Mohamed described as "good ones," that counters with citations from the Qu'ran any statements made by the religious community the committee deems as unsound. The Deputy Minister added that "no one will win this war alone," repeating again that the key to success is defeating radical ideology.

¶11. (S) Finally, Mohamed noted that if Iran were to achieve nuclear weapons capabilities, the Saudis would find a way to deal with it. However, he warned, "if they have it, they will use it." "We need to keep them on the run," he insisted, "so they do not have the opportunity to develop such capacity."

¶12. (U) CODEL Nelson has not reviewed this message.

GFOELLER